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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

November 9, 1971

Dear Colleague:

Daniel Ellsberg's public exposure of Pentagon Papers theoretically should have stirred up a scandal about the criminal origins of the Indochinese war, and theoretically should have mobilized the public to a final and decisive repudiation of both the war and its architects. However, history does not appear to be a rational process, with societies behaving as they theoretically ought. On the other hand, it will not do for anti-war activists and scholars to take refuge in total fatalism, or in the comforting (and perhaps self-pitying) observation that the Pentagon Papers contained nothing essentially new.

There were factors surrounding the Pentagon Papers affair which enabled the momentum of the juggernaut to remain finally unaffected by this virtual coup de grace: factors the absence of which might have led to a far greater efficacy for the disclosures. The main protection for the war-making enterprise was the control of the media by pro-government or impartial (status quo) commentators who refused to discuss the true significance of the Pentagon report. Added to this was a heavy concentration of writings and interviews with former government officials and their publicists--the gist of which was that the Pentagon papers were incomplete, biased, merely contingency plans, out of context, politically motivated, etc. (see letter by myself, Falk, Barnet, Melman, Herman, and Weiss in N.Y. Times, July 17, 1971). These writings and interviews went essentially unchallenged by the press and broadcast media, so that after the initial shock of the disclosures subsided, their damaging effect came to be almost totally neutralized, and the public's outrage subsided into a state of uncertainty, confusion, and apathy remarkably similar to the one which enabled government planners to embark on the escalation in 1965. In short, we are back at the stand-off of the early war years, in which the public still does not really know, even after exhaustive documentation in the words of the policy-makers themselves, that the U.S. is the aggressor in Indochina and that we never had, and do not now have, a legal or moral basis for our presence there.

I believe there are still ways to get this message, finally and effectively, across to the American people. One that is actively being pursued is to mount

ambitious hearings on the origins of the war, with international presence and participants who will compel ample media coverage. The contents of the Pentagon Papers and other incriminating documents would be the main basis of such hearings. Falk, Lifton, Chomsky, Zinn, Raskin, and Barnet have participated in preliminary discussions about these hearings, and steps to create an organizational vehicle for them are in their early stages. At the same time, Ellsberg believes that his own trial next spring will be the Nuremberg of this war; he and his lawyers are confident that the actual contents of the Pentagon Papers must be allowed in court as indispensable for the defense.

Yet, a third major project strikes me as essential. That is to publicly resolve the neutralized state of the Pentagon Papers as soon as possible, by removing all doubts about "biased historians." And the way to achieve that end is for a number of scholars to join together in a simple, cut-and-dry, but momentous research project: a meticulously factual one-volume abridgement of the study--based entirely on the documents.

I visualize this project eventuating as a paperback for wide distribution, entitled something like "What the Pentagon Papers Really Say," or "What the Pentagon Papers Tell Us," somewhat on the model of "The Indochina Story." I also see the project easily being divided into four parts, corresponding to the four volumes of the Beacon Press edition, with each volume being worked on by a different group of researchers. Naturally, there would have to be a project director and some means of cross-checking the work of each research group. The virtue of the division is that it could lead to rapid conclusion of the work, so that the book might be rushed out by next spring, in time for the trials of the Harrisburg 8 and Ellsberg, and the hearings, when the subject will reach a new peak of public interest.

I am writing to you to enlist your support (and that of your organization, if you are associated with one) in the work on this project. I am assuming that anyone who would agree to work on a volume would be able to delegate much of the work either to the research assistants of his institute or to graduate students in his academic department. I would be willing to assume responsibility for one volume.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Mark Sacharoff

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MS:jp

cc to:

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